Handy Hints with Dennis Figg

Buying a canoe

Choosing the right canoe can be difficult, but if you buy a poorly-designed canoe, you may not enjoy the activity...and you'll never know that the canoe design was to blame. Here are some things to consider: hull design and material, durability, how the canoe is outfitted (seat placement, etc.), size (length, width, depth), weight, handling characteristics, cost, aesthetics (how the canoe looks) and load capacity. Try before you buy: borrow or rent different types and manufacturers of canoes and try them out in the water.

CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A CANOE

- How experienced are you? Nervous novices want a stable canoe while adventurers want one that can handle heavy water.
- How many people and gear will the canoe carry? Do you want a solo canoe (big enough for an adult and child) or a tandem (can fit up to two adults and one or two small children or an adult and two children)? Make sure you get a canoe that's big enough for your plans; an overloaded canoe is dangerous.
- How heavy can the canoe be? Will you be portaging often? How much can you lift comfortably?
- How durable is it? A beginner makes mistakes, so a stronger canoe is desirable.

HULL MATERIALS

- Aluminum - practically maintenance free, moderately priced, good all-purpose designs, very durable, resale values high, safe & stable with excellent carrying capacity. Negatives: noisy, cold to sit in, heavy to lift and "clunky." Also, aluminum sticks to rocks instead of sliding over them.
- Fiberglass - greatest selection of hull designs, moderate strength combined with fairly light weight, abrasion resistance is good, fiberglass is easy and inexpensive to repair, quiet hull that slips over rocks. Negatives: more brittle than aluminum & can break or crack if hit hard. Avoid very inexpensive fiberglass canoes: can be of poor quality.
- Kevlar - stronger and lighter than fiberglass...chief disadvantage is cost. Be sure to store a Kevlar canoe out of the sun because UV rays can break down the material
- Wood - striking appearance and graceful feel in the water. Negatives: can't survive banging into rocks or being dragged, very expensive, require constant maintenance
- Plastic - built-in buoyancy, resilience (bounces back to original form after denting), good impact and abrasion resistance, bright colors, quiet and warm hull material, moderate cost, good strength. Negatives: possibly hulls heavy for their size (depends on material & design), UV deterioration.

IF YOU'RE BUYING YOUR FIRST CANOE

- Choose a length to suit your needs, but longer canoes are actually easier to paddle, more stable with the same load, glide farther with each stroke. With a shorter canoe, you have to exert more energy to make it go forward, but it makes sharper turns. Most popular size canoe is 17', but if you plan to paddle with a partner and carry lots of gear, consider the 18' or 18½' models.
- The primary function of width is stability but a wider canoe isn't necessarily more stable under all conditions. Canoes that are too wide aren't as efficient, requiring more work with the paddle. For an all-purpose/recreational canoe, a good width is 34".
- More depth equals additional seaworthiness...but also means more wind resistance, which causes steering problems. Look for depth averaging 14" for an all-purpose canoe.
- In the canoe world, an average-weight canoe is 80 pounds, with 70 pounds considered light. Don't sacrifice good construction for a few pounds. Ask about hull strength first.
- Flat bottom canoes feel more stable when you step in, but can flip over suddenly in wild water. A rounded bottom is good in whitewater but requires skill to keep upright on flat water. Good compromises are the modified round V or shallow arch type.

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